

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**2026 REVIEW OF THE ADVOCATE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE AND THE CHILDREN'S GUARDIAN**

At Preston Stanley Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Friday 8 May 2026

The Committee met at 9:30.

PRESENT

Mrs Helen Dalton (Chair)

Legislative Council

Dr Amanda Cohn
The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

Legislative Assembly

Ms Donna Davis
Ms Lynda Voltz

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Scott Barrett

The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the public hearing for the Committee on Children and Young People 2026 review of the Advocate for Children and Young People and the Children's Guardian. Welcome to Parliament. Before we start, I acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet here in Parliament. I pay my respects to Elders of the Eora nation, past and present, and extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present here or are viewing the proceedings online. I'm Helen Dalton, Chair of the Committee. I'm joined by my colleagues the Hon. Scott Barrett, who's online; Dr Amanda Cohn; Donna Davis, the member for Parramatta; the Hon. Stephen Lawrence; and Lynda Voltz, the member for Auburn. The Deputy Chair of the Committee, Karen McKeown, sends her sincere apologies for not being able to attend today. I thank the witnesses who are appearing before the Committee today. I declare the hearing open.

RACHAEL WARD, Children's Guardian, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined

BIANCA DUFTY, Deputy Children's Guardian, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined

LARISSA JOHNSON, Director, Out-of-Home-Care Regulations, Office of the Children's Guardian, affirmed and examined

ALEXIS BRADSHAW, Acting Director, Working with Children Check, Office of the Children's Guardian, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: I now welcome representatives from the Office of the Children's Guardian. Thank you for all appearing before the Committee today. Please note that the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly social media pages, website and public communications materials. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having your photo and videos taken. Before we proceed, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

ALEXIS BRADSHAW: No.

BIANCA DUFTY: No.

RACHAEL WARD: No.

LARISSA JOHNSON: No.

The CHAIR: Would any of you like to make a short opening statement before the commencement of questions?

RACHAEL WARD: I would, if I could, please. Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear today and allowing me to provide a brief opening statement on the Office of the Children's Guardian's core functions and program of reform arising from the special ministerial inquiry. In February 2025, a ministerial inquiry was announced into the culture and workplace practices of the Office of the Children's Guardian. The year that followed was one of uncertainty for our staff, yet throughout that period they continued to demonstrate professionalism, resilience and a dedication to the safeguarding work we undertake on behalf of the people and children of New South Wales.

The inquiry report, released in September, has marked a critical turning point for the organisation. As the newly appointed Children's Guardian of eight weeks, I consider it my responsibility to act without delay. We are treating every recommendation seriously and have already commenced significant reforms to address the issues identified and to strengthen our culture and, more importantly, our governance. Since the inquiry report was tabled in September 2025, we have moved from planning to delivery, with a focus on practical actions that improve workplace safety, strengthen governance and rebuild staff confidence.

We have focused our work around five key themes that were identified in both the ministerial inquiry and the Cosgrove report and which are integral to our strategic plan. The themes are the way we work, including a functional review and a review of the executive and management structure, which was recommendation 7; workplace safety and wellbeing, which was recommendation 4 (xvi), plus recommendations 1, 2, 5, 10, 11 and 12; cultural competence and cultural safety, which was recommendations 8 and 9; leadership and governance, including Children's Guardian accountability framework, which is recommendations 13, 15, 16 plus recommendation 14; and leadership and management capability, which was recommendations 3, 6, 7 and 16. This work has been centralised as what the office knows as Project Aegis, which we launched at an all-staff planning day in November 2025. Project Aegis represents a shared organisational identity and a commitment to accountability and transparency.

We are determined to build a stronger, more cohesive and future-focused OCG. It is supported by a 12-month road map and underpinned by structured change management to ensure staff are supported throughout this process. For the functional review, we've engaged an external provider to work with us to examine opportunities for shared functions, clearer accountabilities, and better systems and processes, with a focus on breaking down the silos and ensuring timely sharing of information holdings across the agency. We have held several information sessions and workshops with the leadership and staff over the last five months to develop this future vision.

We aim to have a future state of operations presented to executive within the next month. Unlike other States, New South Wales benefits from holding the Child Safe, Reportable Conduct, Working with Children Check and the NDIS workers check schemes under the one umbrella. We aim for the future State to really leverage these benefits to provide the best possible service to the people of New South Wales in keeping children safe. For

workplace and safety wellbeing, we have an employment safety and wellbeing project, which has been re-established with internal committees.

We've revamped our health and wellbeing package offered to staff, including EAPs, cultural and professional supervision and developing a new work health and safety process and system. We have a provider to support psychosocial safety, as well as delivering an initial session in November 2025 following a comprehensive staff survey. We are now implementing action plans across teams within OCG, tailored and targeted to meet each of those teams' needs. We've updated and launched a revised grievance policy and supporting assessment tools, as well as an IT acceptable-use policy.

We've progressed flexible work and hybrid work arrangements. We've increased internal communications to support consistent and transparent updates to staff. Our director of people and culture, who was engaged in 2024, has been leading the work on the Cosgrove recommendations, PMES and key recommendations from the inquiry report regarding leadership, workforce and performance management and employee engagement. On the theme of leadership and governance, we have recruited a manager of governance and risk, initially for a period of 12 months, to develop a new governance framework and strengthen our audit and risk functions.

We've developed PDPs for directors, which link directly to my accountability framework that is in development with the Minister's office and the Government. Of special importance—one I am exceptionally proud of—we've been successful in appointing a Deputy Children's Guardian, Bianca Dufty, who joins us here today. She will be driving the implementation of inquiry recommendation 9, related to improving First Nations leadership, inclusion, cultural load and cultural safety. I will pass to Bianca to say more when I finish about her work plan at the conclusion.

As we work to rebuild and look to the future, the OCG is shifting as an organisation to be a stronger, more mature regulator. This comes at a pivotal moment in the reform of worker screening, marked by heightened media attention and increased community scrutiny. Our focus for the next 12 months will be on compliance, investigation and enforcement. The OCG has received an additional \$5.7 million over two years to enhance these functions. As a result, the OCG established a new directorate in February 2026, amalgamating the compliance and investigation functions for the Working with Children Check, Reportable Conduct and Child Safe schemes.

This team is made up of existing staff and newly onboarded staff, who are a mix of highly experienced former police officers and investigators from other regulators. In March, we launched Operation Sentinel, focusing on holding organisations and individuals to account for not following child protection laws. We issued 24 fines totalling \$27,500, along with 13 official warnings to organisations and individuals. The additional funding also supports the new Working with Children Check internal review function, which commenced in September 2025 and is led by the Deputy Children's Guardian. The team have extensive experience, consisting of experienced existing OCG staff and new staff from specialised child protection roles within the New South Wales Government. The team are already implementing rigorous and timely review processes and have developed a range of applicant resources available on our website.

As at 31 March 2026, the OCG has received 50 applications for internal review: 25 internal review applications for refusal or cancellation decisions, 17 disqualification reassessment applications and eight internal review applications for interim bar decisions. The OCG also continues to work closely with DCJ and the Government as a part of the current out-of-home-care system reform and will seek to align our monitoring and accreditation processes with any new arrangements.

Finally, I would like to promote the annual Working with Children Check Week on 22 to 26 June, where we celebrate the people who help keep our children safe. This year's theme relates to Standard 5 of the Child Safe Scheme around recruitment and ensuring that people working with children are suitable and supported. We remain committed to timely, meaningful implementation of the inquiry's recommendations and keeping you, the Committee, informed of progress. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Would anyone else like to make a statement?

BIANCA DUFTY: I'll make a short statement, if that's okay. Thank you for the opportunity to participate today and share with you the progress we are making on the important piece of work that is recommendation 9. My name is Bianca Dufty and I'm a proud Ngemba and Gamilaraay woman. Prior to joining the OCG in February, I worked as a lawyer with Legal Aid for over 12 years, and most recently as the deputy director of the family law division. I've practised exclusively in the care and protection and family law jurisdictions during that time.

Since commencing with the OCG in February, I have started work on an organisation-wide cultural capability framework. The framework will provide an organisation-wide, high-level framework which will inform

the First Nations program of work and respond to recommendations made in the special ministerial inquiry. Development and implementation of the cultural capability framework responds to the need for the OCG to move beyond a fragmented and localised approach to First Nations initiatives and toward a whole-of-organisation approach.

I'll also guide the OCG in its implementation of the additional guiding principle of the Children's Guardian Act on the need to consult with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities on policies and decisions that impact their lives. My work will build on existing initiatives, including the First Nations program of work, cultural reflective practice, cultural supervision, working with Aboriginal community controlled organisations to strengthen monitoring and accreditation practices, and working with Aboriginal peaks and communities in the working with children Act legislation review.

The importance of a whole-of-organisation approach was reinforced in the special ministerial inquiry, which highlighted the need for stronger cultural foundations and a more consistent and culturally capable service provision. The cultural capability framework directly addresses those findings by designing a framework that underpins all of the work of the OCG.

The CHAIR: We'll move straight to the questions from the Committee. Before we begin the questions, I wish to inform the witnesses that you may wish to take a question on notice and provide the Committee with an answer in writing. I might begin the questions since we've been speaking with you, the Deputy Children's Guardian, Ms Dufty. There was a three-year delay in the appointment of the Deputy Children's Guardian. Can you explain what caused the delay along with the process of your eventual appointment? Why was there such a delay, do you think?

BIANCA DUFTY: I think that might be a question that is best answered by the Children's Guardian. I'm not privy to all of the information that will have been available to the Children's Guardian before my appointment, so perhaps it would be best to pass to the Children's Guardian on that question.

RACHAEL WARD: I will never know fully, I think, is the answer to that question. The role was filled up until 2022 and then, as you rightly identified, was vacant for quite some time. When I arrived at the office on an acting basis in March of last year, the role had gone out for advertising, but there was a delay because of the inquiry, so that was the difficulty last year of filling the role that I can speak to. As to the delay prior to that, I can only surmise, which would be around the debate, I think, that was occurring as to the title of the role, whether it was going to be Assistant Aboriginal Guardian or Deputy Children's Guardian. That did, I think, cause some angst during the period of time.

The CHAIR: What led to the position title change?

RACHAEL WARD: In relation to the Deputy Children's Guardian, as I then advertised it, I just went to the legislation. The legislation provided for a Deputy Children's Guardian and I appointed against a Deputy Children's Guardian but have made it that it is an identified role.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Good morning. Thank you for being here today. My question is for Ms Dufty. In your opening statement you talked about strengthening the organisation's consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community, and particularly some of those legislative changes last year. Could you speak to that in more detail, in terms of what you're doing?

BIANCA DUFTY: Yes, absolutely. The cultural capability framework, as I said in the opening statement, is a really high-level framework that sits over all of the work of the Office of the Children's Guardian. What it does is embed foundational skills that will be required to then implement a First Nations stakeholder and community engagement strategy. That strategy will be developed alongside our First Nations staff but also in consultation with community and peak organisations like AbSec and Aboriginal Legal Service. That stakeholder and engagement strategy is really going to inform all of the processes that the Office of the Children's Guardian takes in terms of decisions that will impact on the lives of First Nations children, young people and communities. That will be a guide that is available for all staff to go and communicate changes to community, and embed not just the consultation but really centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices in the decision-making process and, where we can, engage in co-design.

As an Aboriginal woman, I acknowledge that Aboriginal people often have the answers for Aboriginal children and young people, so we really need to be engaging with community. I think we certainly have had pockets of that happening. The working with children Act review is a really great example of the Office of the Children's Guardian engaging in a really considered and culturally sound way. We engaged an Aboriginal consultant to go out to regional and metro communities and undertake consultation on the working with children Act review. We've got a wealth of information that we've received. I think the community were really grateful for an opportunity to speak with the Office of the Children's Guardian. That, I think, is almost like a "cart before the

horse" example, so to speak, where we don't have the framework yet, but here's an example of what we can do when we do engage with community in an effective way.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. The broader cultural capability framework—that's obviously a really significant piece of work. Do you have a sense of the timeline that is planned for implementation?

BIANCA DUFTY: I do. I think I've been quite optimistic in saying that the framework will be launched in September of this year. I would like to note that there are strategies, guides and other frameworks that will, I suppose, operationalise the cultural capability framework. So the overarching cultural capability framework itself is intended for launch in September. I acknowledge that is a pretty lofty timeline, but I think it's important that we act quickly. As the Children's Guardian has said, we as a leadership team are very keen to be proactive and enact as many of the recommendations as quickly as we can in a way that is sustainable and structured and generates real change for the OCG. September for the cultural capability framework, and I think from that point those other sub-policies will fall from there.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm sure the communities will be grateful for your ambition.

BIANCA DUFTY: I hope so.

Dr AMANDA COHN: It's my pet topic, because I live in a cross-border community. I think in the report there was discussion about the criminal history exchange working group. Could you provide an update on that work? I think probably that's to Ms Ward.

RACHAEL WARD: Is that for the Working with Children Check criminal exchange?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes, so particularly inter-jurisdictional communication.

RACHAEL WARD: Absolutely. New South Wales is co-lead on the information-sharing network that is now—I don't know if you've seen the recent media—taken up by the SCAG group. The Attorneys-General have made a commitment for national reform. The work in terms of information sharing has been highlighted. New South Wales is a co-lead of that. Can I just say, outside of the SCAG, the groups that were in existence are still in existence. So where we can, particularly across Queensland and Victoria, we work with our counterparts in order to share information quickly and efficiently. Then hopefully that information then shares into the broader national conversation about how we can do it nationwide.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks to you all for coming along. It's much appreciated. I want to ask a couple of questions about the Working with Children Check changes. Maybe that's you, Ms Bradshaw. I just want to know how the new scheme is being implemented. Obviously, that restricts access to the tribunal, and I think there's been some internal processes to create a substitute for that. Could you talk to how the new laws are operating and how it's being managed internally.

ALEXIS BRADSHAW: In terms of the Working with Children Check directorate itself, it has had limited impact in terms of how we are operationalising our scheme. The internal review team itself sits outside of the directorate, which was quite intentional, to create very much an independent review process. That team does actually report to Ms Dufty, so she may be better placed to speak to the operations of that team.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I might go to you, Ms Dufty.

BIANCA DUFTY: In terms of the scheme, in terms of the internal review process itself, the legislation does step out the requirements that an applicant needs to meet in order for an internal review to take place. That will be that an interim bar has been in place for six months or more. Using that particular process, if somebody has an interim bar, after six months they can apply for an internal review. It is our intention to turn those around pretty quickly, because an interim bar is in place for 12 months, so we turn those around as quickly as we can. Ms Bradshaw will correct me if I'm wrong, but there's often a risk assessment process that's happening alongside any internal review for interim bar.

The other occasion in which an internal review will happen will be if somebody has been cancelled or refused. Those often take a little bit longer just because it is—we are looking at a refusal or a cancellation. I suppose the process itself looks something like a review occurring that will be conducted by somebody in the internal review team, so a review of that will then be subject to legal review. When needed, it will come to me for the sign-off. That's the review process itself.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Is that a new process that was brought in as a consequence of the changes?

BIANCA DUFTY: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Do you know how many decisions have been overturned as part of that process since the new internal workings have been in place?

BIANCA DUFTY: We have finalised six interim bar decisions. In terms of the numbers that have been set aside or changed, I will just have a quick look. We've looked at one disqualification reassessment and that has remained.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes.

RACHAEL WARD: While Ms Duffy's looking for the number, I might just address you on—I think you were particularly concerned during the last hearing around the positions and how they were going to report.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I'm glad you remember that, because I don't. That's fantastic.

RACHAEL WARD: Yes, I did go back after that day and really re-form it. We did two things. Firstly, we went and reviewed the delegation schedule for the Working with Children Check officers, and we have revamped that, so to speak, so the right level of delegation are making the right decisions at the right point in time, which then enabled the creation of the internal review team to have the right mix of position holders. The internal review team has one 11/12 position—like, a senior manager—and there are five 9/10, which are senior review officers. The 11/12 manager will make a recommendation or an endorsement or a view to the Deputy Children's Guardian. The Deputy Children's Guardian can decide or endorse that decision. But by enabling that, it can also come to me if it's a bit of a more complex or a trickier matter or there's some disagreement. It enables those layers of decision-making that I think you were rightly concerned about—how many people are going to look at that, and if there is something that is a little bit nuanced, how is that going to be captured. That's what we've done to capture that.

The other thing, I think, that you were concerned about is whether or not we're going to publish any decisions and whether or not the community was going to be able to see that. The answer to that is yes. On our website, we will be—it won't be as detailed as a case law note that you might see on LexisNexis, but what it will be is a de-identified version as well as a bit of a concept of our decision-making and the things that we think of, because I think that will also assist applicants when they're applying—what do I need to meet? We've made the application as plain English as we possibly can and we have engaged with Legal Aid and ALS to see whether or not there's availability there for some duty assistance.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Do we have a sense of what percentage of refused applicants are seeking this new form of internal review as compared to how many used to go to the tribunal?

RACHAEL WARD: Not yet. It's a bit early days. We will capture that figure, though, because, as you know, we have to do a report. It's in 12 months now. We've had 50 applications since the commencement of internal review for this portion. The OCG, the Children's Guardian, has always had an internal review function, but this is new for the disqualification of Working with Children checks. It was slightly less, I have to say, than what we thought it would be, but yes, there have been 50.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: In terms of the internal process, is the decision-making process that the person is refused and put on notice of the basis of the refusal and then has an opportunity as part of the internal review to respond to the basis of the refusal and put their case et cetera?

RACHAEL WARD: Absolutely. The letter that goes back on our reason for decision is very clear on the reasons why and the next steps that the applicant can take.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Are there yet any discernible trends in terms of people submitting any forms of expert evidence as part of that process? Are people putting in psych reports, for example, when there's risk et cetera?

RACHAEL WARD: Bianca might be able to answer that. She's seen one this week.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: The reason I ask that is that was a key part of tribunal processes when people would get lawyers and then seek review and, in that kind of forum, they would adduce expert evidence.

BIANCA DUFTY: I think there's been one matter that comes to mind that has included what might be tantamount to expert evidence, but it's not expert evidence in the sense of when the legislation speaks to an expert panel. The expert evidence doesn't derive from a panel. So one of the things that the internal review team will be looking at in the coming months will be how do we stand up an expert panel that can provide evidence of that nature and also how do we engage with suitably qualified persons. I think that's of particular interest for First Nations applicants. Perhaps we haven't seen, maybe, the volume of expert evidence that we thought we might otherwise, but we're certainly keen to look at how we might be able to engage in that process.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: I just want to ask about the Child Safe protocols that schools, government and non-government, are required to implement. There's the 10-point Child Safe. Is that just something that you issue, or is there actually some kind of auditing done, particularly in the non-government sector, of whether that's actually being implemented?

RACHAEL WARD: There's quite a robust scheme that sits behind it from the Office of the Children's Guardian. With the 10 standards, each required entity has to give us a Child Safe action plan—and it is a working document. That gets submitted to us quarterly, reviewed annually, but they have to be renewed and revamped every two years and we're actually just entering that first cycle now of the new plans to be submitted. We have quarterly forums where all of the relevant entities come and they share learnings with each other that the OCG hosts.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: And that will include all independent schools and all tutoring companies?

RACHAEL WARD: Yes. At the moment, the regulations are just being updated and amended. But, yes, that will include that. What we've done is moved a lot to online as well, so there's a Child Safe action self-assessment where people can go in—organisations—and I think probably what you're thinking of is providers regionally that might not have access to attend.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: No, I'm not thinking of that at all. I'm thinking of the proliferation of independent schools. Auburn—just that suburb alone—has 10 and tutoring companies are hundreds.

RACHAEL WARD: Yes, we're expecting 30,000. That's the number that we're looking at, 30,000 new organisations coming within the scheme.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: How do you make sure that, when they're doing their self-assessment, what they're actually providing—where's the actual quantitative ability to say this is actually happening rather than people ticking boxes?

RACHAEL WARD: The first initial tool is a self-assessment tool. Then there's a raft of information and resources on our website that they can attach to. But a lot of the organisations that you're referring to, particularly independent schools, if we use that as an example, have the peak bodies sitting over them. There are ones that actually assist them in developing those tools, and we engage with those.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Just going back to Working with Children Checks, according to the latest annual report the OCG performed 72 per cent fewer audits of registered employers on Working with Children Checks compliance than in the last reporting period, from 280 down to 78 audits. We know that your audits highlight a lot of noncompliance, so how do you intend to increase the audits and do you require additional resourcing to achieve that?

RACHAEL WARD: With the announcement of the money in relation to the internal review team, part of that additional funding was for specific enforcement. It was for an investigation and compliance action team. We have brought that team together. That was established in February 2026. Noting the numbers in the last annual report, as the new guardian I have to say it's not a number that I would want to present to you this year or in the coming years of my term. Whilst education is a very important piece, and it's one that we take seriously—we have engagement officers out in the community, and I think it's an important part of our role—there is a suite of tools that are available to me in the Children's Guardian Act and I intend to use them to enforce children's safety. One of those things that you just mentioned is our compliance action and really taking a front foot on being out in people's businesses and organisations to ensure they're doing the right thing.

In terms of how we're going to do it, we already had a small compliance team. We have merged them. Part of breaking down the silos is actually merging some of the teams that we have working across the OCG together to perform functions across all of the suite of the OCG's powers. But in addition, we've created six new roles—senior managers and senior leaders—which will bring that directorate to a total of 20. The placement of the additional staff brings over 100 years of investigation experience together under the OCG. I hope, and I have no doubt—they've got a very important brief, but they know what they're to do, and that is to really focus on those compliance aspects that you've just mentioned.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Regarding the ban on alternative care arrangements that have commenced on 1 April, do you have enough accredited out-of-home-care providers to provide care to all the children who need it in New South Wales?

RACHAEL WARD: I'll hand to Larissa.

LARISSA JOHNSON: Thank you, yes. As you would know, the alternative care arrangements were really there to provide a service for children who needed emergency placements. Now that they've gone, we have

seen a range of service types that are able to offer that. One of the issues with the ACA arrangement is that the children weren't placed with accredited organisations and they were in short-term unstable living environments. We now know that there are specific models for emergency placements, and there's also been a really concerted drive to recruit carers for emergency arrangements. There are enough accredited organisations to provide for that type of care now, and it is still an area that we continue to focus on, understanding the specific vulnerabilities of children who are in those emergency arrangements.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Just flowing on from that, are there enough Aboriginal community controlled organisations, and are they on country or are they geographically located elsewhere?

LARISSA JOHNSON: As you would know from your question, Aboriginal children and young people are heavily over-represented in out-of-home care, and there has been a strong desire to transition Aboriginal children who are in non-Aboriginal organisations into our ACCOs. There aren't really a sufficient number at the moment. The existing Aboriginal agencies have capacity to grow, but we do focus all of our regulatory attention around new applicants towards Aboriginal agencies. We have a specific priority list around bringing new ACCOs into the accredited space. Once they're in the space, we work closely with them as they grow. I think it is acknowledged that there needs to be more Aboriginal community controlled organisations providing out-of-home care. What we've also seen in accredited Aboriginal agencies is a number of agencies adding residential care as a service type, which also provides a greater range of options for Aboriginal children and young people.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Do you have targets?

LARISSA JOHNSON: Targets of agencies?

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Do you have goals that you've set? Rather than "We know that we need to do this", are there actual targets on what we want to achieve so that we can actually—

LARISSA JOHNSON: Yes, the Department of Communities and Justice has been driving very concerted efforts for a number of years to transition Aboriginal children. There are monthly reports on the numbers transitioning to Aboriginal community controlled organisations. I understand the department does have specific goals and milestones that they are trying to achieve. In our regulatory processes, we do see Aboriginal agencies—we see their growth from those transitions, as well as new entries into care.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: I wondered if someone could tell me a bit more about the engagement of older generations in this? A lot of carers would be grandparents, and I just wonder how we incorporate that into our plans?

LARISSA JOHNSON: If I can clarify—in terms of engaging carers in how we better support them? Is that—

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT: Yes, you are sort of using the grandparents and that older generation. Is that the first option, if possible?

LARISSA JOHNSON: There are two types of carers. One is a general foster carer and the other is relative in-kin care. There is very much a focus on looking to family members initially when children and young people are brought into care. That is a specific area where there's focus for Aboriginal children and young people understanding the importance of kinship relationships. There is complexity for some Aboriginal families in engaging with the Government and feeling confident coming forward to look after the children. There is very much a focus on the importance of extended family for children when they can no longer live with their biological parents.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I just wanted to come to the Reportable Conduct Scheme. In the annual report, you described an increase in notifications and that you'd actually modified the risk-based oversight model so that fewer low-risk cases are reviewed. How does that work and what safeguards are in place there to make sure that you're not actually missing serious reportable conduct?

RACHAEL WARD: The safeguard that's in place is that even though we might not be directly oversighting each and every one that we deem to be lower risk, it is still captured within our system. If we get multiple reports on the same issue, it quickly escalates to "This is no longer lower risk—we've received multiple reports."

Dr AMANDA COHN: Is this a resourcing problem? Would all of these things be reviewed in full if you had more staff?

RACHAEL WARD: Yes. Before, I would say, "This is how many staff I would need"—I think it's going to be really interesting to see the outcome of the functional review, which is due in June. Then I will know

whether or not we have the right positions across the organisation, working on tasks in the right areas and whether or not there needs to be any repositioning—or, indeed, I start making some noise that I need additional resources.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thank you. I'd be keen to follow that up with you after June.

RACHAEL WARD: Yes.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You've said if you get multiple reports, that's no longer a low-risk report, which makes sense. Do you have any kind of evaluation or review or monitoring—for those ones that are deemed low-risk, not reviewed, are you assessing random samples of those? Are you aware if any of those slip through the cracks and should have been investigated? What process is in place?

RACHAEL WARD: I hope not. We have a quality assurance officer working within the Reportable Conduct Scheme, so they are consistently working within our systems to ensure that everything is captured, but if you want specific numbers, I can come back to you and I can take that on notice.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Please. Thanks.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: There seems to have been a significant drop in the number of employers of children under 15 who have been checked by OCG. I'm just wondering if you've got any information on that. The annual report, which monitors employment of children aged 15 and younger, details a 61 per cent decrease in the number of employers of children and young people checked by OCG. This is annual report, page 70.

RACHAEL WARD: I'll take that on notice. I'm not sure what that statistic—

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Sure. Just going back to the Working with Children Check issue, do you have stats on the percentage of refusals that are Aboriginal people?

ALEXIS BRADSHAW: I would need to take that on notice.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes, if you wouldn't mind. Thank you. Just going back to the clearance issue, have you got a sense of what percentage of refusals are people found not guilty in criminal proceedings of an offence but that triggers a review or becomes a relevant matter in the review?

ALEXIS BRADSHAW: If you'd want specifics, I'd need to take it on notice, and even then, it could be quite difficult, because it's not necessarily something that we track.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes. It's just a factual matter.

ALEXIS BRADSHAW: Schedule 1 within our Act is the offences which would trigger a risk assessment. One of those provisions would be not-guilty outcomes for those barring record matters in schedule 2. There would be a large proportion of individuals who are found to pose a risk despite what the outcome of their court proceedings were, but that's not to say that the court proceeding was the sole information that was considered.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes, of course. And in terms of the internal review processes, is there a sort of internal manual that provides decision-makers with the body of previous tribunal decision-making and case law to guide their consideration? How does it sort of practically work?

ALEXIS BRADSHAW: That would be a question for Ms Dufty.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Of course, yes. Thanks.

BIANCA DUFTY: The team has obviously very recently been stood up, so the function is maybe six or seven months old now. What that means is processes, they're in place, they are being refined, and I think now that we've had 50 applications for internal review there's a real sense from the internal review team about what processes look like and where processes need to be tinkered with, perhaps to be more effective and efficient. There's no manual per se, but there are reference documents and there are processes and practices written down that inform the decision-making of the team.

One of the other things I would say is that in addition to those processes and practices that inform the team decision-making, they do have a lawyer currently sitting within the team who does have the wealth of knowledge that is the NCAT decisions that have been made. Notwithstanding that lawyer is embedded in the team, the team does have a great deal of knowledge about those matters and is across those matters. I think in lieu of a manual, that's absolutely a fantastic substitute.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: What's the process adopted to give the applicant procedural fairness? Obviously in the tribunal that was an oral hearing; lots of people got in the witness box. I think you as

an organisation would normally take counsel and then make submissions et cetera. I'm just wondering what process you adopt internally to accord procedural fairness. Is there a draft decision that's given? Is there an oral hearing? Do you write to them? What's the process?

BIANCA DUFTY: I think there are a number of things. One of the things that happens with an initial refusal is the reasons for refusal are particularised so that there is procedural fairness at least at that stage. In terms of procedural fairness for the internal review more broadly, this is something that I think we've been talking about and something that we're very keen to ensure—that applicants are afforded procedural fairness. Allegations, where they need to be, are put to applicants. They are aware of the case they need to meet. That doesn't look like giving them the documents that we've seen, but I think it's certainly open for them to make a GIPAA request to obtain that information.

Whether or not there's another process, certainly something that I think the internal review team is keen to look at is whether there is another mechanism that affords that level of procedural fairness without needing to make a GIPAA application. I think that is something we'll explore in the coming months. That will inform what the practice and procedure moving forward looks like for the internal review team.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Something you tapped into in the tribunal was the applicant would be given a big bundle of documents from all these different agencies—it might be corrective, police et cetera—and then that would be put into evidence in the tribunal. So they don't get those documents as part of the internal review?

BIANCA DUFTY: No, but I think it's something that we're mindful of. As I said, that's certainly something that we'll explore in the coming months.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Interesting.

BIANCA DUFTY: It's an active conversation with the internal review team about how we embed procedural fairness for applicants.

RACHAEL WARD: And to proactively share.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Something that was talked about at the time of the legislation was that people would still have the avenue, in a case of an alleged jurisdictional error, to go to the Supreme Court.

RACHAEL WARD: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Are there any emerging trends in terms of that form of access to justice for people?

BIANCA DUFTY: We haven't seen any.

RACHAEL WARD: We haven't seen any yet, but they could if there was a gross error in law.

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. You will all be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings for corrections. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today, and any supplementary questions from the Committee. We kindly ask that you return those answers within seven days, if that's possible. We will now take a short break.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

KATHERINE McKERNAN, Advocate for Children and Young People, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

UNA O'NEILL, Director, Office for Youth, Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I welcome our next witnesses. Thank you for appearing before the Committee. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages, website and public communication materials. Please inform Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken. Before we proceed, do you have any questions about the hearing process?

UNA O'NEILL: No.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: No.

The CHAIR: Would either of you like to make a short opening statement before the commencement of questions?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, I'd like to make a short opening statement. Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people, on whose lands we meet today, and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present. I also acknowledge Thomas Norman, Chair of the 2026 Youth Advisory Council; Ellen Armfield, Chair of the 2025 Youth Advisory Council; and Una O'Neill, Director, Office for Youth, who is accompanying me today to assist the Committee in its review, given my recent appointment to the advocate role. But, most importantly, I want to acknowledge the previous advocate, Zoë Robinson, and note that the Committee is today reviewing work undertaken during her tenure.

To assist the Committee, I would like to highlight and direct their attention to achievements during this period: the release of the final report of the Special inquiry into children and young people in alternative care arrangements, in September 2024; the review of the recommendations of the special inquiry report by the Department of Communities and Justice, and the acceptance of all the recommendations, with recommendations 1 and 4 accepted in full; implementation of the Recovery Youth Support Service in the Northern Rivers, including a focus on consultation, advocacy, support and engagement; support of the 2024 Social Media Summit, Youth Summit and Drug Summit; commencement of an evaluation of the 2022-24 Strategic Plan for Children and Young People; and consultation and engagement with over 5,650 children and young people.

I would also like to note that during the review period, the previous advocate provided a response to the Committee Chair regarding the recommendations provided in the 2024 review report. In this response, the previous advocate supported recommendations 8, 9 and 10 and deferred consideration of amendments to the Advocate for Children and Young People Act to the Minister, which was recommendation 11. I would like to reiterate that I am also supportive of these recommendations and will incorporate changes to the annual report submitted to the Committee as per the advice provided to the Committee by the previous advocate.

I would also note that recommendation 11 has been addressed by amendments made to the Advocate for Children and Young People Act in November 2025. Given I have been recently appointed as advocate, I wanted to reassure the Committee that the achievements of the previous advocate, Zoë Robinson, during this review period are very much being considered and built on. They include undertaking a review of relevant recent reports pertaining to children and young people in New South Wales and their recommendations, assessing the status of the recommendations, and prioritising any outstanding recommendations.

This includes reviewing the status of the special inquiry report recommendations; overseeing and planning for a 2026 Youth Summit, to be held on 1 December at Liverpool Powerhouse Museum; commencing consultation on and development of a 2027-30 Strategic Plan for Children and Young People, which will incorporate findings from the evaluation of the 2022-24 strategic plan; continuing to undertake consultation and engagement with children and young people, including the first public release of the annual Youth Polling Report on 13 April 2026; and commitment to review the Youth Advisory Council during 2026. Thank you, and I welcome your questions.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Would you like to make a short—

UNA O'NEILL: No opening statement, thank you.

The CHAIR: I might begin with the questions. How has the transition of the role of Advocate for Children and Young People been for you?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: It's a real privilege and opportunity to be appointed to the role. The team and the work of the previous advocate is a really great foundation to be working on. So the transition has been, I think, very forward looking in terms of looking at how we progress the work. We have commenced consultation, as I mentioned, on the new strategic plan, we've released the youth polling report and we're working towards developing the youth summit, so very much forward thinking and forward looking. Alongside that, also using the previous work, as I mentioned—so looking at the reports that have been produced, looking at recommendations to help form my agenda for advocacy, but also identifying three areas of advocacy that are being undertaken right now.

The first is looking at children and young people as victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. The second is looking at the implementation of Thriving Kids and what oversight might be needed in terms of ensuring quality and mechanisms to raise issues by people accessing Thriving Kids. The third one, as I mentioned, is looking at all the reports that have been released over the last few years and prioritising recommendations that we should be advocating for as well. Alongside that, I'm really keen, with the creation of the Office for Youth last year, to look at the functions of the team and to make sure that we are building from the great work that's happened across the Office for Regional Youth and the advocate's office.

We're undertaking four reviews of the work and almost all of them have commenced. The first is a grants review, looking at the grants that we've inherited and looking at making sure that they are strategically aligned, administratively easy and efficient for both applicants and the office in administering, and really making sure that they're fit for purpose in terms of meeting the needs of children and young people in New South Wales. We're also commencing work on developing a community engagement framework to really look at how we engage with communities across New South Wales, to make sure that we're reaching priority populations, including children and young people living in regional and rural areas, and to really make sure that we're supporting local government, the youth sector and other frontline services to be making sure that they're as impactful as possible.

The third thing we're doing, as I mentioned, is a review of the Youth Advisory Council. It's been 10 years in operation under its current form. It's never been evaluated, so it's a really good opportunity to look at the great work that's been achieved and to look at how we can progress that in different ways, and also look at how we engage, for example, with the other youth advisory groups that local councils operate. But also our colleagues in other government agencies have youth councils as well, so we're keen to link in as effectively as possible with them and to make sure that we're really providing a good voice to government for children and young people. The final piece of work is a communication strategy, so really looking at how we get messages out about the Office for Youth and the work that we're doing to children and young people, but also make sure that we're hearing from children and young people as best we can, so that we can provide a really representative voice to government as well.

The CHAIR: You've been talking about reviews. Are there any future plans to run a special inquiry?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: At this stage I'm reviewing the reports that have previously been released, looking at the recommendations and what the gaps might be. At the moment I am just really looking at what that might be. I'm four months into the role. I want to be really certain, if we're running a special inquiry, that it's really going to meet the need and fill a gap, so really keen to do that work carefully. The other thing I'm doing is also talking to my colleagues in the Ombudsman's office, the Audit Office and so on, to make sure that our agendas are aligned and that we're working together in terms of reviewing systems and so on, just making sure that I'm meeting the need that is there rather than embarking on something straight off.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thanks so much for attending today. I've previously raised some concerns about the merger of the Office of the Advocate for Children and Young People with the Office for Youth, and we've had some very high-level discussions about that with the Committee. I'm interested in how that's playing out on a day-to-day basis and how your independence as the advocate is protected.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: We have some systems in place to manage approval processes and to ensure that I remain independent, and that's been negotiated with the secretary. Effectively, the work that's underpinning the legislation—I manage that work and that remains independent. Work that is clearly government work is going through the channels that you would expect in terms of approvals through the secretary's office and then to the Minister. So we have a process in place. The other thing that I'm looking at doing at the moment is a functional assessment of the team, making sure that we have the functions outlined clearly—so not just policies in terms of those processes and policies in terms of maintaining independence, but looking at the functions of the teams, as well, to make sure that that independence is really clear and the functions of the work within the office is really clear in terms of what is Office for Youth work and what is advocacy work.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You've pre-empted my follow-up question. When you've identified something as work to be undertaken in your statutory role, you're obviously not expected to do that work alone as one person.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: No.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm interested in how that works in practice with being able to get the resourcing that you need for that work out of the Office for Youth.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: The funding for the advocate's office hasn't changed. It remains the same. The amount is there and it's ongoing. At the moment, we're working through a structure. I haven't had time to really review the structure and change it to make sure that it's meeting the functions; that's going to happen this year. But in the meantime, the policy team, which was the policy team before the merger, is the team that is working with me on the advocacy work—so that resource has remained the same, if that makes sense, and it's the same for the work that supports the Youth Advisory Council. That team has not changed. It remains the same and they continue to do that work. That is how we're managing it.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Thank you for attending. Both of you, feel free to answer this question. I met with Youth Action recently, and the findings and recommendations in their policy paper, *From Fragmented to Coordinated: Building stronger systems for young people through Youth Hubs*, is very similar to the findings in your report from the most recent questionnaire that you've had with youth. We have a desperate need for safe spaces for youth to gather, whether or not they are in the regions or in the cities. What do you see as your roles in being able to try to actually achieve these tangible outcomes for our youth? Because we're seeing it in our communities where this lack of infrastructure—and when I say infrastructure, it doesn't need to necessarily be a physical building. It can even be investment in the people to support our youth in safe places.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, I can answer that question. We're very aware of the report released by Youth Action. We've had a number of meetings to talk to them about the recommendations. I'm really pleased to say that one of the projects that we're commencing very soon is a partnership piece of work with Youth Action to implement recommendation 1 from that report, which is to really map what is available and what is actually available for children and young people in New South Wales. That can help us see what is available but also look at what gaps there might be and also look at some good practice and models that we could also look at expanding and rolling out in terms of once we've done the mapping, if that makes sense. That's the first piece of work that we're doing. We're hoping to have the report completed fairly quickly—hopefully by the end of the year—but that's the first piece, so we can really understand the landscape, as it were, and then look at what the next steps might be.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Just following on from questioning that I had for the previous people here, we note the impact of the Advocate for Children and Young People's inquiry into alternative care arrangements in New South Wales and the banning of that practice. How have you monitored this transition, and have you continued to engage with children in out-of-home care?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: This is pointing back to the piece of work I'm doing in terms of looking at all the reports that have been released recently. The policy team is currently reviewing all those reports, including the special inquiry and the recommendations. The next step for that will be to look at those recommendations, look at the status of their implementation and then follow up in terms of engagement with the relevant agencies, including Department of Communities and Justice, for example. That is the plan in terms of looking at how the inquiry report has been considered, what's happening right now with the recommendations and then what further advocacy needs to be undertaken by us.

In terms of consultation with children and young people in out-of-home care, that remains a priority. We are undertaking extensive consultation as part of the development of the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People. We have a consultation paper that's available, a survey that's also available and we're also undertaking targeted consultation with priority populations. That includes children and young people in out-of-home care. We will be attending an AbSec event in a few weeks time to speak to First Nations children and young people who have been in out-of-home care to get their views to help guide the priorities within the strategic plan.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Going back to the mapping that you're talking to Youth Action about, how are you going to do that mapping? Quite often, we get people that do mapping by regions. For example, my electorate is always included in the Parramatta region, which will show unemployment sitting about 5 or 6 per cent, whereas my region will have 18 or 20 per cent. Something might look close, but you actually need to get three trains to get to it. How is this mapping actually going to be done?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: It is very early stages in terms of developing the proposal. I think the conversations we've had with Youth Action means the focus won't necessarily be on location per se; it will be about availability of the type of model. That may sound confusing, but we're trying to understand youth spaces as not just physical spaces, but online spaces or groups that might be put together, if that makes sense. We're taking a fairly flexible approach to what the definition of a youth space is. In terms of location, we haven't defined how

we will actually define the regions or the locations. The work that we're doing for the strategic plan is to look at priority populations based on poverty and a range of other things. I would imagine that we'd also take that approach.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: So poverty—what are the other things?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Poverty and the range of vulnerabilities that people might experience. So looking at whether they are rural and regional, the high number of culturally and linguistically diverse people in a community, First Nations and so on. That's how we're approaching it.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Going back to the youth summit on 1 December. Is that a statewide youth summit?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes. That's right.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: I was going to ask how are people going to be selected for this? How are regional people going to be able to access it?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: The youth summit will be held in Liverpool and it is a statewide event. We're currently working out how we ensure really good representation from across New South Wales as well as the diversity of children and young people that are in New South Wales. At the moment, that is being looked at in terms of having a nomination process that we put out via social media so that people can nominate, but also having a fairly significant percentage where we work with stakeholders and communities to have a good representation and spread from across New South Wales.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Just going back to that, I do notice on the Youth Advisory Council, there may be a couple of representatives from Western Sydney. Given that Western Sydney has about three million people in it, it seems that Western Sydney always ends up hugely under-represented. I look at the diversity just in my community and who we end up with on Youth Advisory Council, and it doesn't in any way reflect communities and who they are. People get captured by ideas of what they think communities are. For example, a lot of people think I have the largest Lebanese community because I have a large Muslim community. I actually have more Greeks than I have Lebanese. My Muslim community is Turkish, Malaysian, Afghani, Iranian, Iraqi. How are you going to get that representation across Western Sydney?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: The first thing I should have mentioned in terms of the youth summit and who will be attending it, is that the summit will be held in Liverpool. We're really going to make sure that we have good representation from the local area as part of the summit. In terms of the Youth Advisory Council and your comments around that, I agree that it is always very challenging to make sure that you have a good spread of diversity across what is currently 12 members. We're reviewing the Youth Advisory Council—the legislation has changed so we can now increase the number of people on the Youth Advisory Council. We're undertaking a review to have conversations exactly on those sorts of issues to make sure that we are truly representative. Very happy to speak to you as part of that review in terms of Western Sydney and ensuring representation.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Sorry, I just don't understand. Liverpool is nowhere near my electorate.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: So how does Liverpool ensure diversity when it's a completely different make-up to my electorate?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: I guess what I'm saying is in addition to the diversity that we're looking at in terms of representation at the summit, we're also ensuring that local children and young people are participating in the summit. Apologies if that was not clear.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Yes, but here again this plays into the mix of what people think and what is actually the reality on the ground. The diversity and the issues in Liverpool are significantly different to the issues in Granville and Auburn, and they're significantly different to Mount Druitt and—

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, and I didn't mean to imply that they were the same. I was just trying to clarify that was a component of the summit recruitment that I inadvertently left off. We are at the moment working out the recruitment process for the summit and we really do want to make sure that we have a good representation across New South Wales of young people. The summit is being held not in the centre of Sydney, which it was held in last time, I understand, precisely because we do want to ensure that we are as inclusive as possible.

As I said, with the Youth Advisory Council, we are reviewing it at the moment. The membership is expanding. We're really keen to look into how we link up with a range of youth advisory groups within local

councils, within education, within health, but also the lived-experience groups that are around. Yfoundations has a youth homelessness group. There's a number of groups that are out there and we're really keen to make sure that we're connecting with them and ensuring the representation that we undertake alongside children and young people incorporates as diverse a view as possible. But I'm really happy to talk to you about Western Sydney and to make sure that's incorporated in terms of the Youth Advisory Council review too.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: My point wasn't Western Sydney. My point is that there's a huge chunk of the population that has this very narrow representation. There were two people there that I saw last time. How do you reflect the complexity of youth's experience in Western Sydney?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, I agree it's challenging. I think the other component is looking at how we use social media and our engagement that is not just in-person engagement as well. The communication strategy is looking at that too. Again, it's an important thing to consider, I completely agree with you, and we will continue to try and make sure that we are accessing as diverse a group of people as possible and ensuring that they are represented where we can.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks to you both for coming along. It is much appreciated. I wanted to ask you a question about solitary confinement in juvenile justice facilities. I noted from the annual report that Zoë had made a submission to a Federal inquiry I think in late 2024. It's obviously a concern of the office, and I appreciate that you're very new in your current position, but I just wanted to get your thoughts on the issue. I know that the Inspector of Custodial Services did a statutory review into this—I think that was a year or two ago—and made a couple of comments, including that confinement is the most prevalent punishment in all JJs despite there being no evidence that supports the use of confinement to effect positive behavioural change, and noted that in accordance with international standards, most jurisdictions don't use confinement as punishment. I just wanted to get a sense, Advocate, of your thoughts on it. Is it a priority for you? Have you got any initial thoughts on the issue?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Youth justice is one of the priority issues that needs to be considered by the office, I guess is the answer. I'm very conscious that there's a number of reports that have come out over the past few years on youth justice, and, again, that's why I'm planning to look at all the recommendations and to look at how we prioritise those. I think the issues that the previous advocate has raised and the submissions she's made—and I understand that she did work with the inspector to do that work, that report as well, and so I've reached out. The inspector is currently transitioning out, and there'll be a new person in the role, so I'm waiting for that person to start before commencing meeting with them and talking to them about how we work together. But no, absolutely it's a priority.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes, it's good to hear. We had an event in Parliament yesterday where some advocates came and gave us some information, particularly about the psychological harm that it inflicts, the lack of positive behavioural improvement from it, but also, frankly, the difficulty of behaviour management in a really complex environment. I'm not suggesting that it's simple for the staff at all, but it's good to hear that it's a priority. It seems to be an important area.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm interested, moving forward into your work plan, how you've built consultation with Aboriginal children and young people into that work. I know there was a previous approach where there was briefly an Aboriginal Advocate for Children and Young People, and that role is not there anymore. What's your current approach?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: I'm very conscious that my colleagues across the country—a lot of them have First Nations commissioners, advocates or deputies as part of the structure and functions of the organisation. That is very much something that's being considered in terms of what the team looks like and what the roles should be within the Office for Youth. Alongside that, in the interim, though, I've identified that as a gap in terms of the team. For example, with the strategic plan work that we're doing, we've engaged Thirriwirri, which is an Aboriginal community controlled consultancy, to work with us to undertake consultation with First Nations children, young people and organisations, to ensure that we're encapsulating and incorporating the priorities and suggested actions, and so on, from First Nations children, young people and organisations.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I'm also interested in the feedback that you're getting from the community as part of the strategic plan work. Something that has been raised with me is that often services for young people are funded through discrete program or fragmented service funding, rather than an approach to core funding in these developments. Is that something that's also been raised with you?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: That's one of the things we've heard. That's largely through engagement with the sector. That is definitely something that is a challenge. In terms of the things that we have heard at the moment, though, the priorities are reflecting the youth polling report information, which are concerns around

mental health, cost of living, bullying and access to education. They are the things we're mainly hearing, but that is certainly something that has been included in the feedback, yes.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You mentioned the survey, and thank you for sending that to us. It's really helpful for us to hear that direct platforming of what young people have told you. What happens next with that data that you've gathered?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: That data is very much going to be incorporated into the work of the strategic plan. We are privy to that information, which has helped inform the development of the consultation paper as well. The consultation paper—we've structured the consultation around those priorities, and also the priorities that were identified through the youth summit report as well. The strategic plan that we're doing isn't a blue-sky piece of work; it is building on the priorities that have been identified through the polling and through the youth summit report, and then also looking at what the Government is doing now and then looking at data and research—so really looking to build on that foundation. The youth polling is very much a part of that.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I'm very conscious of the importance, in your roles, to be engaging with our CALD communities, particularly with those associations that seek to represent their communities. I am very aware of the fact that we have very children as young as five, six or seven unsupervised in public libraries across our city, and no doubt across New South Wales as well. This is a challenge that councils are facing. In my area and neighbouring electorates, often these children are particularly from CALD communities, where parents are working. They can't afford for their kids to go to after-school care so they are falling through the gaps.

There's high risk for those children. There's high risk for the local government, because they're in these difficult situations. These are the types of very real challenges that we're facing every day across our city. I just want to know what work you're doing with Multicultural NSW to work to build relationships with these organisations. Many of them know what's going on, but they just don't know how to do that outreach to those families. They're not the responsibility of the schools because it's after hours, but there is a real risk to these kids.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Thank you very much for raising the issue of children and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. I'm very early into my role, but I will note that has been identified as one of the big gaps in terms of considering the needs of children and young people from those communities and also in terms of the service system as well. Whilst I'm identifying the kinds of priorities that we need to be focusing on, that issue will be one that we will be looking at.

In terms of engagement with Multicultural NSW, we have them on the advisory committee, I'm on the advisory committee of the multicultural strategy, and I will note too that Children's Week theme this year is on looking at the issues and needs and celebrating children from culturally diverse communities, so we'll be looking at hopefully partnering with Multicultural NSW on that and engaging with the range of community organisations that are out there. I've had some initial meetings too with a range of culturally and linguistically diverse community organisations who are briefing me on those issues as well. As I said, it's very early days, so I haven't done the extensive amount of discussion that I need to, but it is a priority, yes.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: In your role, or in the Office for Youth, do you speak to school principals as well? Do you speak to local councils? What are the avenues for you to be talking to people at the coalface, so to speak, about what they are experiencing and what their concerns are for children?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, absolutely that's very much part of the work of the advocate, in terms of engaging not only with children and young people but also with organisations that support children and young people. In terms of work that we've done since I've started, I've set up a sector reference group, so we now have a statewide sector reference group that includes the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network and others on it to provide advice from their members. But, also, when we go to communities to do engagement work with children and young people, we very much engage with the services and organisations in those areas as well, so the answer is yes. We work with and gather information from as many areas as possible.

Again, with the strategic plan, we have a multifaceted kind of way of doing consultations. As I said, there's a consultation paper; the purpose of that is largely to engage with government agencies and to get their feedback and input. We also have a survey that's available for anyone to undertake and we're also undertaking targeted consultation with children and young people. We're very much working with the NGO sector to really make sure that the survey, in particular, is disseminated as widely as possible so that we get as much information as possible to really help us assist with identifying priorities and developing the plan.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I have met with international students, both at universities but also at private training colleges. The area that I represent is a big education centre. Those young people arriving here in Australia are falling in the gaps. They're not funded in any way by us as the State because they are not residents, and yet they are here living in our communities, and they are suffering from loneliness. They're unable to work for

extended hours, so they've not got enough income often to be able to survive on a weekly basis, even though we know they're supposed to be able to do that. I really feel for their welfare, for those that are living in the area that I represent, and, of course, right across New South Wales. What work can the Advocate for Children and Young People be doing to support these young people that are a really important part of our communities?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: I think that's, again, something that we'll need to consider as we develop the work this year. I am aware of the issue, and I have had some initial conversations with the City of Sydney and the work that they have been doing in their area for young people, particularly international students. I've had some early discussions with them about that, but it's something that we need to think about and consider how we can look at the issues.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: It's also kids that are coming here for high school as well.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, that's right.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: The CALD organisations you've been working with—can you give us some examples of who you've been talking to?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes. I met with—I'm going to have to use the acronym and I might need to take on notice spelling out the name, but it's CASS. It's a Chinese community organisation.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Yes, it's CASS.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: I met with them this week and we talked about the work that they do with young people, particularly newly arrived migrants. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to meet with the Multicultural Youth advisory network CEO yet because she's been unwell for the past month, but we're meeting in the next few weeks. That's an example of the organisations I've met. I am still meeting with as many people as possible and I'm very keen to meet with as many organisations as possible.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Can I suggest that you look to an organisation called STARTTS—

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, of course, STARTTS.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: —as a good starting point, particularly for the extreme conditions of some of our people. Also, I wonder—and it always surprises me that people, particularly governments, don't do more of this—whether you look at the figures of where there may be disadvantage and there may be problems and zone into those areas as areas of youth advocacy. I'll give you a couple of examples. Boys high schools, in particular, have low rates in their schools. They turn out some very good students. There are obviously problems within that context and there is an issue about young boys, in particular, being left behind. If you're looking at what's happening in those schools, the figures will just tell you that.

Principals also have a very good understanding of what's going on. One principal, for example, said to me, "How do I teach kids when there are 18 people living in a two-bedroom apartment?" There is a huge problem in my electorate, and in Granville and Fairfield electorates, of overcrowding because there are significantly high numbers of people that don't have work rights and you have a mixture in houses relying on each other. Do you zone in on where the figures tell you the problems are?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: That's work that we've done for the consultation approach for the strategic plan as well. We are targeting particular areas and groups to make sure that we're capturing their input. But we're also using the data and research available to us to really look at identifying priority issues as well. I thank you for that information, actually, and I think it's a really good point in terms of looking at the education data and talking to our colleagues in education around making sure that we are, when we're looking at the education component of the strategic plan and the work that we do—that I do as an advocate—really making sure that we're looking at priority issues. Thank you for that.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: What is the data that you're looking at at the moment telling you are the key issues?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: The key issues that have been identified do actually mirror the youth polling response as well, which is really looking at making sure that we're looking at children and young people's mental health, and particularly access to services and the cost of accessing mental health supports. Cost of living is an ongoing issue for children and young people, including housing, so I note the overcrowding that you mentioned. That's one of the things that really needs to be looked at in terms of having safe and affordable housing.

Also, looking at access to education and having a safe environment at school, so bullying is something that has also been identified as a priority. And then also really looking at priority populations as well, so really making sure that we're taking the needs of children and young people who might identify as LGBTQIA+, looking

at children and young people who are from CALD communities and, of course, looking at children and young people who are First Nations as well. The consultation paper has a range of themes and we're focused on issues in all of those themes, but those themes have been based on what I've just generally referred to in terms of the issues.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: When you did the survey and it came back with the high levels of stress, what was the largest age group doing this survey?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: The age group was 10 to 24.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: How many responses were there?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: There were 2,600.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: How did they break down in terms of socio-economic regions?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Can I take that on notice in terms of providing a proper answer?

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Yes, because I'd be interested to see who is actually answering the survey and where they come from. I get that mental health and stress is a huge issue, and access to mental health. But having had a couple of daughters, if you asked a couple of HSC students whether they're stressed, I'm pretty sure every single one of them is going to tell you they're stressed and it's their biggest issue. We do tend to get in politics a lot of the people who are the most educated, have the greatest ability to have their voices heard, as opposed to those that aren't having their voices heard, and that's why it's important to see how the breakdown's coming.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: I just want to correct—I said 2,600 people completed the survey. Apologies; it was 2,300. But the survey, the polling work that we did, really tried to ensure that we were getting a spread of input from across children and young people in New South Wales. In terms of location, we really made sure that we had a good spread of regional, rural and metropolitan.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: I'm going to go back to my previous comments. I get that you got a good spread, but that doesn't make it representative. What I want to see is who it's representative of. That's why I'd like to see the breakdown.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, okay. Let's take it on notice and we can provide the methodology, because we did really work hard to make sure that we had a good spread across socio-economic background as well, to make sure that we were really reflective of children and young people in New South Wales.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I'm just wondering, Advocate, if the issue of police powers is on your radar at all. Strip-searching of children has been a big issue, and there's obviously a lot of discretionary police powers and a lot of policy that underlies how they're exercised. It seems like potentially a fertile area for advocacy inside government. I am interested in the extent to which that is on your radar as a priority.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Again, the previous Advocate did some work on the strip-searching issue in particular. I'm very aware of that work. And, again, I guess my answer would be that I am aware of particularly the contact that young people may have with police, particularly First Nations young people. It is, in terms of looking at priorities, one of the things that we would be looking at, absolutely.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I was at an event in Nimbin on the weekend, in northern New South Wales, and it seems to be a bit of a free area in terms of the way that cannabis is regulated, or not regulated. I couldn't help but think when I was up there that it's very different to what I experienced in western New South Wales, working as a criminal lawyer, where so many Aboriginal kids were stopped and searched for possession of small amounts of cannabis.

Obviously, police have an important job to do. That might be justified sometimes, but there seems to be an inequity there in the way that low-level type street offences are enforced, and a lot of harm can be caused. If you're strip-searching a child in relation to suspicion of a small quantity of cannabis, it seems an extraordinary thing to justify when you walk down the street of Nimbin and see what's happening there. I'm just interested to what extent that sort of inequity and the fact that there could be a policy response to that in terms of police discretion and administrative measures is of concern to you.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, absolutely. We've made some submissions since I've started in the role, and one of the submissions that we made was making that point out: that you may make laws, but they will inadvertently, unfortunately, impact First Nations young people in a way that they may not impact others. That's really important to think about when you're looking at any piece of legislation, any policy, in terms of how are you managing impact that can negatively impact communities such as First Nations young people. It's a really very important thing to consider and we will always be raising those issues, yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes, good to hear. It just seems to me that because it's a policing function—and that's a really important and legitimate function—the effect of it can sort of go under the radar, if you like, because it is a lawful function. But there's always a question: Do you use a particular lawful power? Is it appropriate to use it? Is it fair how you're using it? I think those seem to be important considerations for your role in government, because you've got that platform inside government and publicly.

KATHERINE McKERNAN: Yes, absolutely, and I'm really keen to work with BOCSAR as much as possible, too. They monitor that kind of thing very well, and I'm really keen to continue to work with them in terms of understanding what's happening and then using that work to then advocate on issues, absolutely.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Fantastic. It's really helpful. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Are there any other questions?

Dr AMANDA COHN: I wanted to come to the question of very young children, because the age remit for the Office for Youth doesn't go down as far as your statutory role. Could you speak specifically to how you're ensuring that kids under the age of 11 are represented?

KATHERINE McKERNAN: The legislation, as you'd be aware, covers from zero to 24. We will be ensuring that our advocacy piece includes all children and young people within that age range. I understand that the previous advocate did some work in the early childhood space demonstrating how you can engage with children under the age of four in terms of consulting and getting their views. I've had two very early conversations with the commissioner, the early childhood commissioner, around how we might work in the regulatory space to engage with very young children. That's two initial conversations, but that's something to be considered. In terms of the advocacy work, particularly in the care and protection space, children are very important so they will absolutely be a priority in terms of the work that we would do. I think that's my answer.

Dr AMANDA COHN: I note you looked at Ms O'Neill during part of that answer, which was to do with some work that was undertaken prior to your time. I wonder if you could speak to that?

UNA O'NEILL: Sure. In relation to what Katherine was just saying, in the previous advocate's term we supported the Committee to hear from preschoolers in relation to early childhood centres and how it feels to be in an early childhood centre and their safety. We do ensure that when we are doing consultations, such as with the Strategic Plan for Children and Young People, we are going to spaces where there are younger children, such as primary schools, before- and after-school care and those kind of services where we can speak or listen to children.

I'd also note that all of our work is underpinned by child rights and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is very strong in terms of the principles of our work and we'll continue to do so. In relation to celebrating children and their rights, we undertake a lot of different activities for Children's Week each year in October, such as engagement activities with children and young people, competitions, activity sheets et cetera. We will be doing the same this year.

Dr AMANDA COHN: There was a mention in the report specifically about consultation with four-year-olds at preschool. I'm interested in understanding how that how that worked.

UNA O'NEILL: In relation to the inquiry, the early childhood inquiry?

Dr AMANDA COHN: Yes, it was part of the Brighter Beginnings.

UNA O'NEILL: That was work that the advocate undertook in collaboration with the Department of Education and NSW Health. The participation team visited several early childhood centres around the early childhood health checks that children do at preschool. They worked with the Department of Health to gauge how children were feeling after their checks and how they felt about the experience. A number of different methodologies were used to work with children in those circumstances, and then give that information back to NSW Health and the Department of Education.

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings for corrections. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today and any supplementary questions from the Committee. We kindly ask that you return these answers within seven days. Thank you sincerely for attending the inquiry today.

(Una O'Neill withdrew.)

THOMAS NORMAN, 2026 Youth Advisory Council Chair, Youth Advisory Council, sworn and examined

ELLEN ARMFIELD, 2025 Youth Advisory Council Chair, Youth Advisory Council, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing before the Committee. It is great to see you here. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used for social media and public engagement purposes on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly social media pages, website and public communications material. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos and videos taken.

The CHAIR: Would either of you like to make a short opening statement before the commencement of questions?

THOMAS NORMAN: I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional owners of this land, and First Nations people from every corner of the world who may be present in the room today. I would like to remember those who lost their lives in the Bondi attack and hold their families in our thoughts. I would like to acknowledge the emergency responders who attended for their bravery, and all of our paid and volunteer emergency services personnel across the country for their efforts each and every day, including Marine Rescue, who are currently grieving two of their lost. I would like to acknowledge the men and women in our Defence Force for their courage and service to our nation. Even though we don't often see their amazing work, their contributions do not go without notice. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the Committee here, the Office for Youth and the Youth Advisory Council for their tireless effort to advocate for children and young people.

I come from a small town called Illabo, of less than 150 people. When I was deployed to Deniliquin with the RFS in 2022, I was standing outside the fire command centre when we were told that the community only had three days until the next wave of the flood that was going to come. What I witnessed was a community that could have been torn apart, that could have lain down and given up, but what I saw was RFS and other emergency services personnel working shoulder to shoulder with the community, whether it be removing valuables from homes, laying tarps or laying sandbags. What I witnessed was bravery—not people who were fearless, but people who chose to stand up in spite of their fear. This is what gives me hope. Hardship and uncertainty don't break us here in Australia; they bring us together and make us stronger, and this is what gives me hope for young people across our nation.

ELLEN ARMFIELD: I also would like to acknowledge the traditional lands of the Gadigal people, where we meet today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and I extend my respects to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people who are with us today. Sovereignty was never ceded, and this always was and always will be Aboriginal land. Thank you, Committee, for your continued support and commitment to the Advocate for Children and Young People and to the children and young people of New South Wales, by extension. My name is Ellen and I was the 2024 to 2025 Chair of the NSW Youth Advisory Council, or the YAC, following my term as a member on the council the year prior. I'd like to acknowledge the work of the fantastic group of young people that I had the privilege of working alongside during both of my terms on the YAC. I also extend that acknowledgement to the current Youth Advisory Council and their chair, Tom, whom I'm joined by.

The work of the council would not be possible without the unwavering support of the advocate and the office. During my time on the YAC, I saw firsthand how the office prioritised and championed the voices of young people from all across the State. Listening to and acting on the voices of young people is something that must continue to be pushed across many sectors. Young people are continually described as the future, but we are seldom given opportunities to shape that future. Young people today are growing up in a very unstable time. As I am sure the Committee is well aware, the issues facing young people today range from the climate crisis, to the cost of living, to mental health, to the unstable geopolitical context which we are growing up in. Of course, these are not specific to young people. However, in the face of these systemic issues, young people's voices are continually dismissed. We need leaders who value our voices and see young people not as a homogenous group but as an extremely diverse group of people with varying needs and wants.

Speaking from my own personal experience as a young person in metropolitan Sydney, the young people around me are disillusioned by government, and instead we are seeking other ways to try to get our voices heard. Young people are turning to avenues such as social media and public protests to express our values, both of which have been restricted or attempted to be restricted by the State and Federal governments. Right now we need leaders who will listen to young people. We need leaders who seek out the voices of a wide range of young people, not merely to meet a quota, but to listen and to act accordingly. Young people are the future, but we also deserve an opportunity to shape it.

Positions such as the Advocate for Children and Young People and councils such as the YAC are vital in ensuring that our voices are not dismissed, but these avenues cannot be the end. We must invest in and value young people. As I wrote in the 2025 annual YAC report, those in power must be open and receptive to hearing from a diverse group of the population, not just young people who are already in positions of privilege. Those in power must make decisions, whether that be economic, climate, social justice or otherwise, with the future of young people in mind. Hopefully there will come a day when it is the rule and not the exception that young people are consulted and their voices are not only heard but put into action. Thank you, and I look forward to answering the Committee's questions.

The CHAIR: Before we begin with questions, I inform witnesses that you may wish to take a question on notice and to provide the Committee with an answer in writing. Ellen, from your opening statement, specifically for young people, can you give me an example where you have not been heard?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: I think what I was talking about is more that young people often are asked to come and give witness and testament about how they're feeling, and we don't often see that translated into action. I should have said my wording differently. I think we are heard in terms of people hearing our voices, but in terms of that being turned into tangible action—I'm not speaking for the current YAC, but the feeling among many of my peers is that it doesn't feel like young people's voices are as valued in terms of how we turn that into policy.

The CHAIR: You're from Sydney?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes.

The CHAIR: Does your council offer a youth council? Can you participate?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes, we do. These types of avenues are really important. I think the YAC is really important and youth councils are really important, but they're only as important as how much the people in power are open to hearing and then acting on those voices. The more people in power show young people that they are going to take their words into account and act on them and make changes based on that, the stronger those committees will be, because young people will feel more inclined to share and speak and voice their opinion.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thank you both for your opening statements. I thought they were fantastic. Well done. I was interested in where you and your peers get most of your political information. Do you get it from the mainstream media—newspapers, TV and so forth—or are you getting it from other sort of alternative social media or whatnot? Maybe starting with you, Thomas, and then you, Ellen.

THOMAS NORMAN: I would say my answer is going to be different to most of my friends. So most of my friends probably get it from social media. I actually enjoy watching press conferences, so I often watch press conferences. That's just my personal thing that I like to do in my spare time. But yes, I would say, for the majority of my friends that I talk to, it is social media.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: How about you, Ellen?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Social media for people my age, absolutely—different accounts on social media, such as The Daily Aus, that are more targeted towards young people. I have been tending to get my news from Substack or independent media that's popped up recently. I know in terms of my cohort at uni, for example, a bunch of people get their news from that side as well, but definitely social media over mainstream news.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I think you said something, Ellen, about young people being disillusioned with the political process or something like that. I might be erroneously quoting you there. I am wondering if you could expand on that. How do you feel young people—obviously it's incredibly diverse, but to the extent people are disillusioned or not engaging with the political process or cynical about it, what do you think are some of the driving causes of that?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: There's a lot around climate and a lot around young people's climate anxiety and young people's anxiety for the future because we're growing up in a really unstable time. We're not seeing as strong action on climate as we would like for our futures. Again, I'm not speaking for the YAC; I am speaking for myself and my peers. Things like cost of living and housing—I could be getting this wrong, but according to a Mission Australia survey last year, cost of living was the highest stress on young people. I'm happy to fact-check that. That's wild, for young people to be really concerned about the cost of living. We need to be setting up futures for young people that support that and look after that. There are a myriad of things that are pressing down on young people, as there are on many people at the moment, but it just doesn't feel like our futures are being safeguarded.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: You said something before about protest laws. I was wondering why you mentioned that in your opening statement and what's the connection between that and feeling like your futures are not being adequately taken care of and so forth?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: I mentioned it because I was thinking about ways that young people can contribute to political conversations or have their political opinion heard, and especially for young people who are under 18 years old, they don't have a right to vote, so they go through non-mainstream ways, or young people who don't know about avenues such as the Office for Youth or the YAC. Those types of avenues include social media and public protest. Both of those recently have been blocked or are intended to be blocked for young people in relation to social media, but for many people in relation to public protest.

There was also research from the Australian human rights centre for research, I think—I could be getting that wrong—in 2024 that said that when protest is quashed, those who have the least access to political avenues are the most affected by it. Young people are that. Young people do have the least access to political avenues. Then when you put on top young people of colour, Indigenous young people, LGBTQA+ young people, it just kind of grows on that. Restrictions on protest do impact young people and potentially disproportionately.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: I've got a couple of questions, but one I'd just like to go to Thomas first. You did say you're in the Rural Fire Service. I'm ex-military, so I appreciate the hands-on thing. There is a more common problem these days, and you'll see it in the Rural Fire Service and the military, of recruitment and getting people. The biggest barrier here is getting young people in, as the population is ageing in those kind of volunteer organisations. It's kind of an aside, but do you have any views on that?

THOMAS NORMAN: Yes.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: I'm sure you probably do.

THOMAS NORMAN: Thank you very much for the question. I would 100 per cent agree getting people, especially young people, to join is a massive issue. At the moment, our average age in brigades is about 55 for the RFS and recruitment is very difficult, which is actually something I'm very passionate about. I just received \$50,000 to do a social media campaign to recruit more young people in our regional areas. That's separate to a project I'm working on with Minister Dib as well on that—again, recruiting young people into the RFS. This is for two reasons. We are about a 70,000-strong organisation, but out in the country, as you'd be well aware, there's no fire, police or ambos. So if there's someone who's injured, fire, or illness of some sort, it is the RFS that turns up there first. There's that factor, that we actually need more volunteers. There's also the impact that it has on young people.

Personally, being involved in the RFS for six years—and my family has been helping protect our village for the last 117 years through the various fire services—I've noticed a difference in me. I would say I'm a better person because I'm a part of that organisation, whether that be the leadership skills, the people that have trained me, the opportunities I have got through deployments, going to the Young Member Leadership College at the Australian police academy in Manly, whether it be the Young Members Forum we went to in Dubbo, there's numerous opportunities that we have got. I would say that purpose—I know that my community needs me and I'm part of the community—I think that's really important for young people. What I have noticed within myself, or talking with friends, having that drive is really important.

I think that volunteering, giving more of yourself, is really impactful. For example, two years ago we had a fire during harvest, and when we're harvesting it can cost farmers up to \$15,000 an hour not to be harvesting. To actually hop off your header and go and help your neighbour out is actually a massive financial sacrifice you are making, but if the community doesn't work together, it doesn't work. I saw 40 farmers, we were all out there helping put out this fire, and it's the community sacrificing for the community. I think that working together and that cohesion makes us stronger. It is hard. I do not want to underestimate it. It is hard and it does require sacrifice. It is difficult and there are costs. But I think the personal growth and communication is really important. That is why I'm so passionate about recruiting young people to come and be part of volunteering, whatever that may be, in regional—part of the RFS or whatever that is—because I actually think that you will get more—

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Make sure you grab kids from the city as well; don't just take the regional kids.

THOMAS NORMAN: That's right. I actually think you'll get more out of it than what you will give. I think that it will change you as a person and make you a better person.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Yes. I do recall going to Batlow after the fires went through there, and the school captain at Batlow High had been in the RFS and had actually saved all the houses around them because no-one else had come in. It is a tragic thing to have to deal with. I had some guys in from Sefton High School the other day and they were talking about the ban on devices in schools and how they had actually found that a really good

thing. Do you guys have anything on how that's been contributing to greater stress on people and mental health of people, and whether you see those bans on social media and on mobile phone devices working?

THOMAS NORMAN: Would you like to start?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Sure. I am happy to take the one on devices in school on notice because I honestly don't know too much about it. I'm not in school anymore. In terms of the social media ban, sorry, could you repeat the question?

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: They're in high school. Probably because, generationally, you're just shifting out of it—it's like me; I learned to touch-type on a manual typewriter because they said we won't get an electric one. That's how old I am. I started school in the '60s. But I'm just wondering if you're getting feedback that these are having good impacts, because they were saying at their school that it had made a huge difference not having mobile phones at school and people always on social media at school all the time.

ELLEN ARMFIELD: I'm actually getting a lot of feedback that the social media ban isn't—that a lot of young people are still on social media.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: We figured that would happen.

ELLEN ARMFIELD: That's what I'm hearing most of the time in terms of talking to young people under 16. I think there are absolutely negative consequences of social media. I personally block my own social media apps during the week. But I have talked to different young people from across various life experiences about how social media is often used as a way to connect with other people who are similar to them, like neurodivergent groups or queer groups, and that avenue isn't as open anymore, so they're just trying to find new ways to connect with people.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: To work in?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes, exactly. So I think it's about finding ways away from social media that can still fill that same gap and aren't harmful.

Ms LYNDIA VOLTZ: Is it having an educational impact, though? I mean we can ban things. We banned marijuana a long time ago and people still smoke marijuana—only in Nimbin though. But it's a message you're sending that, look, we think this is harmful, and over time it changes. As we've seen with young people, alcohol intake has dropped significantly because education has taught people that it has harmful effects. Do you think over time it will change?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes, I think the tide is definitely starting to shift on the opinion of social media. Everyone is starting to realise that it's not fantastic for our mental health and for society in general. But I think what needs to be looked at more is how social media needs to maybe be better regulated and social media companies need to have a duty of care towards people on them rather than an outright ban because, for better or for worse, the world that we live in—social media is part of it now and young people should learn to swim in the waters of social media before they're just chucked into it when they get older than 16.

THOMAS NORMAN: I find it a complex situation because, on one hand, I am trying to recruit people for the RFS on social media. I do see a few benefits. I actually see a lot more negatives compared to the benefits. It can be a good tool. I would say if the whole goal is connection, I'd say it could be a good tool. But if the goal is connection, let's try and do that in person. If it's a way to communicate to then meet up, that sounds good. But I think more in-person things are good. At the end of the day, you can put as many blocks in as possible, but it has to be someone's choice in empowering people and educating people to make that choice. Because as many bans as you put on alcohol or marijuana or something, there are always ways around things until the person chooses that this is not something they want to use.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: This question is to both of you. How did you find out about the opportunity to be on the Youth Advisory Council in the first place?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: I work for another organisation called batyr. It's in the preventative mental health space. They sent out an email in April 2023 saying that the YAC was opening for recruitments and it sounded interesting. I applied and that was my first year out of high school. So it was through batyr, an already established youth mental health organisation.

THOMAS NORMAN: My dad sent it to me on Facebook. It is funny that you asked that because two of our members for their youth advisory projects are doing something in regards to opportunities for young people and how to find them. That's been identified by many of our committee members. For example, there's a organisation called Ripple, which has a website with lots of opportunities. I think this is a very relevant question in terms of how we can ensure there is opportunities out there. I tried to find some for myself or friends, but it's

hard to find it in one place that's easy and has good filters to filter by age, what category—whether it be political, whether it be sporting, whether it be financial grants. A simple user interface that's easy to use could be very beneficial and is actually something that we talk about in our council a bit.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: I note that the frequency of your meetings—in 2024, the YAC met three times and in 2025 it met four times. Are you satisfied with the regularity of those meetings and are there opportunities in between those meetings to engage with other members of the YAC and to work together?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: I love YAC meetings. I always found them really fun days and really important days. I'd always be happy for more. I do understand that it takes a lot of work from the office to organise for everyone. We're a group of young people from all across the State coming together. We had a WhatsApp group so that we could message each other between meetings. We also received lots of communication from what was then ACYP between meetings as well and through emails—the participation team were also on the WhatsApp group. There'd be various times where we would do online meetings or one or two of us would meet with a few people. There was definitely communication between meetings but I think there could be space for more meetings. I know how much work goes into bringing the meetings together so I understand that they're limited for a reason.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: But they could potentially be online meetings in between the face to face?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes, 100 per cent.

THOMAS NORMAN: I very much agree with Ellen. I agree that it takes a lot of effort on the office's part to make these happen. I also love going to the Youth Advisory Council meeting, so I would definitely be open to more. I think for me, from what I've seen in my life, is that to create a strong team requires building strong relationships. I have a really good relationship, especially with our regional members, because we fly in the night before and we get to go out for dinner. I think there's something special about sharing a meal with people and getting to talk about what's going on in their life and it's not just the very tight agenda, which is good. We get lots of things done from 8.00 a.m. or 9.00 a.m. to 3.00 p.m. But having that space to be able to talk outside the meeting, I think, is really good. Sometimes I check in with our members, give them a call outside, which I find really good. I do also want to say I really appreciate the office's work to have our two-day retreat away. I think that was really good for building connections in amongst our team so we can work well together.

Ms DONNA DAVIS: Ellen particularly, but both of you may like to answer this. You talked about being heard, and obviously the advisory council gives you that opportunity to be heard. Do you feel that what you are saying when you do get together, and you get to have your retreat, is being fed into a process where you can actually see tangible responses and actions to what you've been proposing?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes, I think ACYP, or now the Office for Youth, is really good at letting us know where our feedback went and what they did with it. They were really good at taking minutes and referring that onwards. I think in terms of actual policy change, as I was saying previously, we seem to see less of. Again I do understand government and policy work slowly. We're not expecting overnight change. I think there genuinely are people, like everyone in this room and everyone at the Office for Youth, who do really want to hear from young people. I don't doubt that. It's just how are you taking what we're saying and then actually putting that into action. We want to see change. Things like youth summits and forums are fantastic, but they're only as good as the change that comes from them as well.

THOMAS NORMAN: I just had one quick thing to add to that. From my experience, when I talk to other people and they ask my opinion on this, I would say change is hard, very hard. In my opinion, if you want something to happen, you've got to be passionate about it and you've got to be willing to put in a lot of work. To get to the point where I am now currently, working with the Minister on a project and also raising that \$50,000—it was so many noes leading up. It was probably three years' worth of work where there were so many people who are like, "It's not possible. It's not possible. You're too young." It's a lot of work. But if you're willing to put in the work and willing to be dedicated, yes, it's possible. Someone once told me, "No-one is going to care as much about your thing as you care about your thing, so you're just going to have to put in the hard yards and it's going to be really difficult."

Ms DONNA DAVIS: That's right. You're lucky you've got Minister Dib.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thanks so much for being here today. It's fantastic to hear directly from some young people as part of the proceedings. There are obviously 12 people on the YAC, and I had the pleasure of meeting with last year's YAC, not this year's yet, but I was so impressed by the breadth of experience and different issues that people had brought to the table at that meeting that I had got to watch. I'm also cognisant that there are only 12 people on the YAC, and you're obviously saddled with the enormous responsibility of trying to represent the diversity of young people across the whole State. I'm interested in how you approach that and what avenues you have to hear feedback from your peers and bring that into the room?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: Yes, a hundred per cent. It is hard carrying that—the whole of New South Wales—for 12 young people. For me personally, I was really passionate, especially in my second term on the YAC, about bringing in the voices of people with disabilities, particularly those who may not communicate in the same way that is done in these types of forums, or those who really are often left behind or not given a seat at the table. Then I also do a lot of work in the mental health space and so wanted to really bring that in as well.

I work in the disability space, so I come into contact with a lot of young people with disabilities and so I was really able to bring on what I was hearing from them. I organised focus groups to talk directly with young people with disabilities and their families. I also work in the mental health space. No longer anymore, because my term has finished, but I was on the Batyr youth advisory council. I've done work with Orygen. I've done work with the Butterfly Foundation. Through those organisations as well I've been able to reach a bigger pool of young people with lots of different opinions and—yes.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You're welcome to add something before I ask another question.

THOMAS NORMAN: For me, I like to use any opportunity I am given, whether that be conversations with people at a bus stop or at a train station, or different things like that, whether it be my friends or the people around. I can't be everywhere at once, so whatever small opportunities or conversations, I can ask. Something I really enjoy is—it's a bit of a side thing—talking to the backpackers we have working at our farm and hearing about the political systems all around the world and how they educate the young people. We had one backpacker from Germany who talked about how everyone had to go home and write a paragraph or whatever about each political party, and go out and research it for themselves, and I thought that was really interesting.

For me, I used to be part of Jump Rope for Heart and I used to skip competitively and I've been speaking with the K-2 kids in our local Illabo school. I was speaking to them about volunteering and leadership, with the slight curriculum change—don't quote me exactly on the wording, but about a holistic child and the extra marks for extracurricular things. I was talking to them about what it looks like for leadership and volunteering, and can you do that as a kindy kid? Can a kindy kid who stands up for their friends to a bully—is that leadership? Is picking up the rubbish where no-one sees it volunteering, not being asked? I'm going back in about a week's time to speak to those kids again.

Dr AMANDA COHN: You said you had four meetings a year with these really packed agendas. I know there are many different issues that people want to raise. To what extent do the young people have the power to set that agenda versus being asked questions by government to provide feedback on? Do you think that balance is right?

ELLEN ARMFIELD: At the start of every meeting we do hot topics. That's the opportunity for young people to share whatever's going on in their community or anything that they're particularly passionate about. There was always time made for that; that was always really valued. Then the YAC project—so my first term was a group YAC project and my second term was all individual projects. That, again, is another space for young people to set the agenda on their project and what they're going to do. But in terms of the meetings themselves, correct me if I'm wrong but I think the majority of it was an already set agenda, from memory. It was hot topics first and then the set agenda and consulting with different people. But there were groups that came in and did say, "We just want to hear from you; what do you want to tell us?" I think that is valuable as well.

Dr AMANDA COHN: Thomas, obviously you're right at the start of your time with the YAC. Is there a project for this year yet?

THOMAS NORMAN: Yes, we're each doing individual projects for this year, so similar to what you guys did last year. Just to add quickly to what Ellen said, we also added something in this year: 60-second speeches. I was really keen to give other members an opportunity where they get 60 seconds, where I talk with them a bit beforehand and work on that storytelling about projects they're particularly passionate about, or a story that might be why they're so passionate about their projects, which I found really encouraging, hearing the stories of the young people and why they're so passionate about their projects.

Dr AMANDA COHN: It might be a question to take on notice, but I'd love a list of the projects. I'd love to know what are the topics that people have raised for this year. Thank you.

The CHAIR: I think that concludes the inquiry. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today. I really enjoyed what you had to say. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings for corrections. Committee staff will also email any questions taken on notice from today and any supplementary questions from the Committee. We kindly ask that you return the answers within seven days, if that's possible. Thank you again for attending. Well done.

THOMAS NORMAN: Thank you very much for having us.

The CHAIR: That concludes our public hearing today. I place on record my thanks to all the witnesses who appeared today. I also thank the Committee members, the wonderful people around me, the Committee staff—even better—and the Hansard and AVB teams for their assistance in the conduct of the hearing. Thank you for everything that you do.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 12:30.